

Icarus as artwork

Caroline Vout

The story of Icarus, the boy who flew too close to the sun, is well known to us, largely from book 8 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. But that text is not the last word on his story. Many writers and painters have found inspiration in Icarus. Here, Carrie Vout shows how Ovid's very visual account already turns him from boy to artwork.

*I'm not the first or the last
to stand on a hillock
watching the man she married
prove to the world
he's a total, utter, absolute
Grade A pillock.
Carol Ann Duffy, Mrs Icarus*

Britain's Poet Laureate, Carol Ann Duffy, gives us an unsympathetic Icarus. It is easy to laugh at him. Silly thing should have listened to Daedalus, his father. But Icarus makes an exhibition of himself, gets carried away. His free spirit is literally his downfall. He defies his dad's advice, flies too close to the sun, melts the wax that binds his wings together. A Looney Tunes moment. Flap, flap. Splash! He plunges into the sea. Death by misadventure. Except that everyone does things that land them flat on their face. And not just children, or husbands. It is part of growing up. Woe betide anyone who aims this high. Icarus warns all of us against over-ambition.

It is a fine line, between the laughable and the tragic. Icarus' story is a sad one: a real weepy. He is not the macho male of Duffy's poem, but a little boy, who has been imprisoned, through no fault of his own, by King Minos. Desperate times call for desperate measures, and taking to the skies beats digging an escape tunnel. In the most famous version of the myth, by the Roman poet Ovid (in book 8 of the *Metamorphoses*, see inside back cover), Icarus is described pre-take off, as 'standing together with his father', 'not realizing that he was handling things that would endanger him', as 'with a happy face, he caught at the feathers that blew in the passing breeze and softened the yellow beeswax with his thumb'. He's a typical child, getting under the feet, and displays what Aristotle and Pliny claim is characteristic childish 'artlessness'. Only the grown-ups know the risks: why else are the cheeks of Ovid's Daedalus wet with tears or his hands trembling as they fit the wings?

Even the words used of Icarus are ominous: A 'happy face': the Latin expression implies 'shining' – with joy, or from the reflection of fire? As he beams away and plays at softening the wax, he assumes the role of the sun which will kill him (the same verb *mollire*, meaning 'to make soft', is used both here of his actions and later in the poem of the sun's effects).

It makes for difficult reading. Daedalus kisses the boy for a final time. And they're off – across the Aegean, past Samos, Delos, Paros... – as he teaches him the 'destructive arts of flying'. For all of his efforts to imitate 'real birds', Daedalus is now resigned to fearing for his son 'as though he were a bird fearing for its offspring'. His aspirations to play Nature at her own game are revealed as precisely that, as desires rather than realisations. Before we know it, 'desire' for the heavens has replaced 'love of their homeland', and Icarus is riding dangerously high. The next moment, he is flailing; falling; calling his father's name. 'The miserable father, now a father no longer, shouted "Icarus, Icarus, where are you?"'.

Bad dad, great artist

It is hard not to think that Duffy has picked the wrong victim, especially given what happens directly after the Daedalus and Icarus episode. Just as he is burying his son, Ovid's Daedalus is visited by a real bird, a partridge, which beats its wings together, calling 'joyfully'. But this is no ordinary bird. Rather it is, or was, his nephew, Talos, who had once wanted lessons in how to be an artist. So talented was he that Daedalus' pride could not stand it – and he had thrown him from Minerva's citadel, claiming that he had fallen. Hardly an auspicious start to his career as a teacher or guardian of children. Art before family. But moved by the boy's skill, Minerva, goddess of wisdom, caught him mid-flight and cloaked him in feath-

ers – to live on as the antithesis of Icarus, a low-flying reminder of Daedalus' failure.

The first three stories in book eight of the *Metamorphoses* weigh parent-child relations in feathers. The opening part is about the treacherous daughter, Scylla, who is changed into a rock dove. Daedalus tries to facilitate this kind of change of nature himself, and laboriously at that, faffing over the smallest detail of the wings so that 'you might think that they had grown like that'. Art imitating life; outdoing it even. And it almost works: as he and his son fly through the air, fishermen and farmers stare, amazed, 'believing them to be deities'. They are not. He is not. Nor it would seem is he a good father. Interestingly, when he first balances on his wings, he is described not as 'father' but as 'artist'. There seems to be a tension between the two identities: in the Latin, the word 'father' (*patris*) sits (together with the verb meaning 'hinder' or 'obstruct') sandwiched between the words 'wonderful' (*mirabile*) and 'work' (*opus*), which agree with each other. It is as if the word order is emphasizing how Daedalus' paternal role gets in the way of his creation of great artefacts. What is more important to him, his artistic ambition or his paternal duty? Are his tears and trembling hands really due to anxiety for Icarus, or down to excitement? Though his son dies, he escapes to Sicily, and lives on, his status as artist intact, winning the credit for artistic innovation everywhere, from steam baths to buildings to living statues. Icarus arguably increases this reputation. As he drowns, it is not 'daddy, daddy' he shouts but his father's *nomen*: his 'name' or 'reputation'. Not only that but his own name lives on forever in the island of Icaria. Folly it was to fly too close to the sun, but his fall is Daedalus' greatest masterpiece.

Frederic Leighton's *Daedalus and Icarus* c. 1869

Icarus is an artwork, and always in our view. Even within the Ovid itself, there is a strong emphasis on looking. We look back at him with Daedalus anxiously, then skywards towards them with the fisherman, shepherd, and ploughman. Next we see the islands of the Aegean with Icarus, and finally, are back with Daedalus, who

is 'no longer a father', but artist, looking at the feathers on the waves and (to quote the Latin) *devovit suas artes*. The usual translation is that he 'cursed his arts', but it might also be translated 'he dedicated his arts to the gods'. Small wonder that artists, ancient and modern, have been attracted to the story. How do they compare to him?

At Pompeii, several wall-paintings survive, all of them similar, which repeat the figure of Icarus more than once within one frame – their virtue being to show the fall without falling. As in Ovid's literary account, fishermen lead the viewer to look up, so as to admire the boy's acrobatics, and at the same time, to catch sight of the chariot of the sun-god steaming towards him. The addition of female figures in the foreground, who again look in and up, guide our gaze towards Icarus and the walled city of Cnossus, asking us to equate them as examples of Daedalus' workmanship. They also distract our focus from the body of the boy washed up on the shoreline as though laid out on display, not to mention the urn which presumably holds his ashes on the column to the left. Originally, the flying Daedalus would have occupied the gap, bringing the various elements of the painting together. The sadness of Ovid's poem is somehow quelled: no flapping, no cries, no splash, no tears. The emphasis here is on performance, spectacle, *comme-moration*. Daedalus is the circus-master.

But my focus here is different, the canvas in question a large oil painting, first exhibited at the Royal Academy in London in 1869. This time, Daedalus looks more like a slave than a showman. All attention is on his son, who stands on a promontory overlooking the sea. He is a victory-figure almost, a substitute for the Nike of Samothrace statue, all pale perfection and billowing drapery. He is also spookily similar to the Hermes figure in the 'Hermes and baby Dionysus' sculpture from Olympia (above) – a piece attributed to fourth-century artist Praxiteles, who was said by one ancient author to be superior to Daedalus. Although the statue cannot have served as inspiration for the painting as some scholars have claimed (it was not discovered until 1877!), seeing the similarity is helpful. Like Hermes, the messenger god with the winged sandals, Icarus is winged and resolute, ready to take off, the absence of the babe in his arms underlining his maturity compared to Ovid's incarnation. Divine! Just unveiled, he is a work of art, receiving his final checks from his mechanic/creator.

Sharing the plinth-like promontory, and in similarly strong pose, is Minerva whose presence reminds us, by contrast, of Icarus' human status, and of the death and divine rescue of Daedalus' nephew, Talos. Icarus is doomed, but rendered immortal in the process, far more memorable than a

puffed-up partridge. A beautiful boy, victim of premature death, he is the Heath Ledger of his day, created not by Hollywood but by his father. Yet even his father deserves our pity. In Vergil's version of his future (in book 6 of the *Aeneid*), he lands not in Sicily but in Cumae where he builds a Temple to Apollo. 'You too would have found a place of honour in this great design, Icarus, had your father's grief allowed it. Twice he tried to fashion your fall from gold. Twice those paternal hands fell from the task'. Even the best artist has his limits.

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